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Y Gweinidog Newid Hinsawdd
Minister for Climate Change



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref JJ/11383/21

Radnorshire Wildlife Trust

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Dear Radnorshire Wildlife Trust,

Thank you for your highlighting the issue of high phosphorus (P) levels in the River Wye through your public campaign. As Minister for Climate Change overall responsibility for water policy falls under my portfolio. Please find below details of the actions the Welsh Government is taking to tackle pollution in the River Wye and across Wales.

First, I would like to reassure you that I am extremely concerned about the impact of pollution on the quality of our rivers. Clean water and a healthy environment are essential for life in Wales and tackling pollution is a priority. The causes are complex. No single measure will solve our nature crisis, and more needs to be done to tackle all cases of river pollution.

Our Programme for Government includes a commitment to begin the designation of inland waters for recreation. We have an ambition to enhance the recreational and wellbeing opportunities for local communities. I want to work with communities to help drive improvements in river pollution management in a similar way in which the identification of beaches as bathing waters has achieved for Wales.

The issue of high P levels in the River Wye and its tributaries is particularly challenging. Natural Resource Wales' (NRW) initial assessment of P levels in our river Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), including the River Wye, indicate that the reason for waterbodies failing P targets are from a diverse range of sources. These include agricultural practices, sewage treatment work discharges and private drainage discharges. Reductions in nutrients entering the rivers therefore need to be sought in a wide range of sectors across the catchment. NRW is working with Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water to undertake modelling to apportion sources to pollutant levels on a sub-catchment level. This work is expected to be completed in the Autumn 2021. It will help determine a plan of action, specific to each catchment.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

NRW has set up a project board to investigate and tackle P pollution and dealing with the issue is part of their Corporate Plan for 2021-22. NRW will work with key stakeholders to consider how to establish practical nature-based solutions in riverine SACs, such as river restoration programmes, that can both improve water and habitat quality, while reducing nutrient inputs. A cross sector approach will be required to deliver these improvements. The Welsh Government has therefore established a Management Oversight Group to provide strategic direction.

Specific pressures which affect the water quality of the river Wye include agricultural activities. The Welsh Government works closely to provide guidance and financial support to the farming sector to develop sustainable land management practices. The Wales Land Management Forum sub-group on agricultural pollution has met regularly over the last three years, with specific guidance being made available to the agricultural community through Farming Connect. £16.5 million has been made available through to farmers, through support schemes, in 2021 to help improve nutrient management and to reduce agricultural pollution. In addition, the Welsh Government has provided £2.5 million to NRW to negotiate land management agreements across the protected sites network. Part of this funding will help tackle phosphorus issues on the River Wye.

In terms of regulatory context, the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016 require intensive poultry units to obtain a permit to operate, which includes measures to protect the environment. The measures include the use of 'Best Available Techniques' to prevent or minimise emissions and impacts on the environment.

The Water Resources (Control of Agricultural Pollution) (Wales) Regulations 2021 complement the permitting regulations and reduce the risks of pollution associated with intensive poultry units and those which do not require a permit to operate. The Regulations aim to ensure nutrients are used more efficiently, to meet the crop need and to prevent excessive nutrient applications, which lead to pollution and environmental harm.

As set out in our Programme for Government, we are working on creating a new system of farm support which will maximise the protective power of nature through farming. Following our White Paper last year, we will introduce an Agriculture Bill, which will reward farmers who take action to respond to the climate and nature emergencies.

Reducing water company discharges into watercourses, to improve water quality, is also a priority. Welsh Government and NRW officials are working with Wales' water companies to develop Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans for the next 25 years. The plans will help ensure water companies invest strategically and transparently for a wastewater and treatment network that is resilient and affordable in the short and long term.

The Welsh Government has already taken action by making sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) mandatory on almost all new building developments. This will relieve pressure on the network by redirecting and slowing down the speed at which surface water enters the sewer system. It will help ensure storm overflows are only used as a last resort. Our new Programme for Government includes a specific commitment to enhance the SuDS legislative framework to provide additional environmental, biodiversity, well-being and economic benefits to our communities.

There needs to be a fair balance between our economic goals and the environment upon which they depend. We also need to act decisively to tackle the climate and nature emergency so that people can go on treasuring Wales' rich natural resources for generations to come.

Close cooperation between stakeholders and government will be necessary to achieve our common goals. I would welcome the opportunity to work with the Trust as we look to develop sustainable solutions.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Julie James". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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